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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of verbal strategies on children's performance of tasks requiring persistence was investigated among 36 male and female preschool children ranging in age from 4 years to 5 years, 5 months. Two tasks designed to measure persistence ability were sequentially presented to the children: one task required the child to drop wooden pegs, one at a time, into a large jar. The other task required the child to find and mark circles in an array of geometric figures. The tasks were performed under three different conditions: task-relevant self-instruction, task-irrelevant instruction, or no-instruction. In the task-relevant self-instruction condition children were asked to verbalize statements reflecting the task requirements. Children in the task-irrelevant condition were asked to generate statements about things they found pleasant to do. In the no-instruction condition, children were told only how to perform the tasks. It was hypothesized that task-irrelevant verbal plans would be effective in improving children's performance on both tasks. Results are discussed. (RH)

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THE EFFECTS OF VERBAL SELF-INSTRUCTIONS ON CHILDREN'S PERSISTENCE TASK PERFORMANCE

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Running Head: Verbal Strategies for Children's persistence

The Effects of Verbal Self-Instructions on Children's Persistence Task Performance

In a recent series of investigations, Patterson and Mischel (1975; 1976) reported that temptation-inhibiting self-instructions which helped focus the child's attention to the forbidden toy and away from the unpleasantness of the task were more effective than task-facilitating or task-relevant instructions on a task in which children had to work at a repetitive, boring task while simultaneously inhibit looking at a highly attractive toy. It is plausible to view the Patterson and Mischel task as being comprised of two types of self-control, namely persistence at an unpleasant, repetitive-type task and inhibition of a highly desired, yet forbidden toy. As a result, it is also possible that there are different effects of verbal self-instructions for performance on the two types of tasks.

There is ample evidence that children's performance on inhibition tasks is facilitated exclusively by the use of verbal instructions which are semantically relevant to task performance (for review, see Waters and Tinsley, 1982). Yet, there is no evidence of the verbal strategies which would benefit children's performance of persistence tasks. Some evidence from investigations involving adults suggests that verbal plans which are semantically irrelevant to the task enable the subject to endure the unpleasantness of the task longer (e.g., Kanfer and Goldfoot, 1966).

With these results, the present investigation was designed to

explore the effectiveness of verbal strategies on children's performance of two tasks requiring persistence. It was hypothesized that task-irrelevant verbal plans would be effective for children's performance on both tasks.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-six male and female children, ranging in age from 4.0 to 5.5, with a mean age of 4.8, were selected from a local preschool to serve as subjects. Children were randomly assigned to receive either task-relevant instructions, task-irrelevant instructions, or no instructions (control group).

Persistence Tasks

Two tasks designed to measure persistence ability were presented to the children, one at a time. One task required the child to drop wooden pegs, one at a time, into a large jar. The other task required the child to search, among an array of geometric figures, for circles. Upon finding a circle, the child was instructed to place an 'x' inside the circle.

Procedure

Upon entering the experimental room, the experimenter asked the child to sit in the chair at the table. She explained that she wanted to see how well the child could perform the task. The experimenter then explained that she had forgotten a pen and paper, would have to leave the room for a while (maximum of 15 minutes) and that the child could perform the task while she was gone. Furthermore, if the child decided to finish the task before the experimenter returned, the experimenter explained that by the child's ringing a bell on the table, she would return. To be sure that the child understood how to bring

the experimenter back, three trial rehearsals were performed where the experimenter left the room and returned promptly following the child's ringing the bell. Following the three rehearsals in which the experimenter returned to the room when the child rang the bell, the experimenter restated that she had a task she would like the child to do. She explained the task instructions first for the first task and then later for the second task.

Verbalizations

Children in the task-relevant self-instructions condition were asked to verbalize aloud statements which reflected the task requirements. Each child said, "I must keep working. I must keep putting pegs into the jar (or I must keep searching for circles). I must work until (the experimenter) returns."

In the task-irrelevant instructions condition, children were asked to generate statements about pleasant things they liked to do. The experimenter agreed with the child on whatever pleasant statements he/she provided.

In the no instructions condition, children were simply told how to perform the tasks and then the experimenter left the room.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There was a significant task by verbalizations interaction ($F'(2,33) = 5.84$ $p < .01$) for the persistence tasks. The facilitative

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Insert Table 1 about here

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role of verbal self-instructions differed for performance of the two tasks. Children given the task-relevant instructions persisted longer on the circles task than children in the other two conditions. On the other hand, children given task-irrelevant verbal self-instructions worked longest on the pegs task. These findings suggest that the two tasks require different abilities of the children. The circles task demanded more skill and cognitive sophistication on the part of the performer than did the pegs task which merely required each child to drop pegs into a jar. The circles task required the child to process a certain amount of information, i.e., that he/she is searching for the geometric figure, circle, and, that upon locating a circle, must write an "x" inside it and so on. Children reminded of these requirements, via task-relevant instructions, not only worked longer but produced more work than did children given task-irrelevant instructions ($t(22) = 1.90$, $p < .05$, one-tailed test).

The pegs task was not a demanding one for the children to perform. However, the repetitiveness of simply dropping pegs into a large jar made the task unpleasant for them to continue. Thus, task-irrelevant verbal self-instructions diverted the children's attention away from

TABLE 1

MEAN AMOUNTS OF TIME SPENT
WORKING ON PERSISTENCE TASKS

	Task Relevant Instructions	Task-irrelevant Instructions	No Instructions
Pegs	265 sec.	406 sec.	335 sec.
Circles	382 sec.	266 sec.	248 sec.

the unpleasant characteristics of the task and toward more enjoyable thoughts and sustained longer persisting times while task-relevant verbal self-instructions continually focused attention on the repetitive nature of the task and decreased persistence time.

Several points can be discussed regarding these data. First, preliminary evidence exists that persistence and inhibition are separate forms of self-control. That is, the verbal plans which facilitate performance in the two task situations are different. Thus, it is suggested that these two self-control types merit separate lines of investigation.

Secondly, while children's ability to inhibit behavior is improved with semantically relevant verbal strategies, the effects of verbal plans on children's ability to persist in unpleasant work-oriented situations were more complicated than originally predicted. Persistence is dependent, in part, on the requirements of the task. Tasks which are cognitively challenging to the child require task-relevant instructions while task-irrelevant verbal instructions are helpful for tasks which are quite simple yet monotonous.

Finally, with recent evidence that some self-control tasks are not, in fact, measuring self-control as we currently conceive it (e.g., Bem and Funder, 1978), the next important step is to assess the external validity of the tasks used for this investigation.

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